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Press' job: Cover or undercover?

By LARS-ERIK NELSON

Washington—Four months after it decided, in the interests of secrecy, to stop giving briefings to newsmen, the Central Intelligence Agency has quietly decided to reinstitute the practice—but at a price.

The agency, according to a well-informed source, is again willing to brief selected American reporters in "special circumstances." It will give "background" information to newsmen about to embark on trips abroad, provided that, when they return, they brief the agency on the countries they have visited.

The shift in policy threatens to revive an 8-year-old dispute between the agency and the journalism community on the rights and wrongs of using newsmen to gather intelligence. It is also bound to raise new questions about the CIA at a time when the agency has successfully weathered a storm over the fitness of William Casey to be its director.

Most importantly, it once again raises the specter that any American newsman operating abroad may be accused of reporting to the CIA, as well as to his editors.

THE CONTROVERSY OVER the CIA's use of journalists as agents and of journalist "cover" for its own career officers first erupted in 1973, when then-Director William Colby disclosed that the agency had about 40 full-time and part-time United States newsmen on its payroll. During the 1950s and 1960s, several correspondents for major American news organizations were, in fact, career CIA officers.

In November 1977, Colby's successor, Stansfield Turner, issued a set of guidelines that barred the CIA from entering any relationship with journalists "for the purpose of conducting intelligence activities." Turner allowed himself a loophole, but in general the guideline was strictly interpreted.

One former reporter recalls driving out to the CIA's leafy campus in McLean, Va., for a briefing before leaving on a trip to Eastern Europe. The scholarly, pinstriped CIA analyst discoursed for an hour on the politics and economics of the region—and then confessed he had never been to the Soviet Union.

"Well, when I get back, I'll tell you what it was like," the reporter offered. "That will not be necessary," another CIA officer said primly. "We'll just read what you write."

Under the new guidelines, such "debriefings" would be the expected repayment for the initial meeting.

A CIA OFFICIAL HASTENS to add that the agency is not asking reporters to recruit spies or operate as bagmen or even to find out specific pieces of information: "We are not tasking newsmen. We are not giving them assignments. But we have decided

that information-sharing from now on is going to be a two-way street. We used to think we should brief reporters out of a sense of public responsibility. Now, we want something in return."

In fact, there has long been an informal sharing of information between journalists and the CIA. In some countries, the Soviet Union, for example, everybody—journalists, spies, diplomats, scholars and even the Russians themselves—is wrestling with the same problem, trying to pierce a shroud of official secrecy and find out what is really going on.

To quote former Washington Post correspondent Ward Just: "There is a natural affinity between journalists and spies." But editors argue that the mere suspicion that a reporter might be in contact with the CIA undermines his credibility and exposes him to possible arrest.

The CIA argues that any patriotic correspondent should be happy to report on anything he may have learned that could help the national interest. Many correspondents are indeed willing to do so—on a voluntary basis. To make them sling for their supper is something else again.

AND THERE IS A DARKER SIDE. A journalist, as much as a spymaster, has an obligation to protect sources. How many people—either in this country or overseas—would talk to a reporter at the risk of having their names entered somewhere in a CIA dossier?

How many American television crews would be allowed to film a foreign demonstration—or even a bridge or a dam—if it were suspected that their on-air film and the thousands of feet of "out-takes" would be turned over to the CIA?

Colby and Turner both opened up the CIA so that its analysts could enlighten the community, at the same time that they cracked down on the use of reporters to gather intelligence. Casey is going in exactly the opposite direction.

There is an obvious advantage in this for the CIA. Newsmen can move around much more freely than the average CIA agent operating under "shallow cover" as an embassy diplomat. But in the end, it is self-defeating. Once journalists are open to the accusation that they are spies, they run the risk of finding themselves in the same position as the scholarly CIA analyst on Eastern Europe, discoursing learnedly on places he had never seen.